DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 229 CS 213 261

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TITLE Resisting Difference: Student Response in a Multicultural Writing Classroom.
PUB DATE 20 Mar 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Beliefs; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Differences; Higher Education; *Ideology; *Multicultural Education; Teacher Student Relationship; Theory Practice Relationship; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Deconstruction; *Difference (Concept)

ABSTRACT

In the past few years, a number of theorists who advocate the study of difference have been debating the purposes and priorities of this approach to educational practice. Investigating values and ethics, particularly issues of race, gender and class, should do more than encourage students to deconstruct dominant ideologies. Tensions inherent in teacher-student dialogue complicate any attempts to promote cultural critique or to effect ideological transformation. Teachers must understand how students resist transformation, and thus how to respond to student resistance. A freshman writing course was designed that asked students to read and write about difference, specifically multicultural perspectives on identity. Students, rather than displaying a resistance to dominant ideologies, tended to see mainstream values and beliefs reflected in the readings. This phenomenon was most evident with regard to the responses to Michelle Cliff's writings. Students chose to ignore the representation of a fragmented self in Cliff's "A Journey into Speech," instead finding a unified world-traveler, one with whom they could identify. Surprisingly, the texts verified what the students already believed, instead of raising doubts, as several student excerpts demonstrate. Students must be provided with critical alternatives to the dominant ideologies, and it may be a good strategy to have students investigate their own resistance to ideological change. By aiming to promote resistance and ideological transformation, the study of difference asks students to participate in the social struggle over meaning. (HB)

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Resisting Difference: Student Response in a Multicultural Writing Classroom

CCCC, Cincinnati, 20 March 1992
Jody Swilky

In the past few years, a number of theorists who advocate the study of difference have been debating the purposes and priorities of this approach to educational practice. Dale Bauer and Patricia Bizzell, for instance, contend that investigating values and ethics, particularly issues of race, class and gender, should do more than encourage students to deconstruct dominant ideologies. That is to say, this practice should offer students a critical alternative to the ideologies that many students have internalized (Bauer 389; Bizzell 671). The means to such ends is by engaging students in a rhetorical process that encourages them to resist social norms and to identify with a critical alternative that a teacher endorses (Bizzel 671; Bauer 389). Teachers strive to effect ideological change by asking students to give up ingrained beliefs, experience ambivalence, and appropriate new perspectives for understanding the world.

While this pedagogy aims to promote consensus and change, it may produce more cultural conflict, between a teacher and students, than cultural critique and ideological transformation. This rhetorical process is likely to incite resistance from students and involve teachers in resisting student response. Recent

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examinations of student response to the study of difference support this claim. For instance, in her analysis of her freshman writing students' response to feminist thinking, Janice Woolf observes that asking students to scrutinize their ingrained ideology and to consider critical alternatives to social norms elicits passionate and persistent resistance, from males and females alike. Even most attempts to reformulate convictions, through rewriting essays in response to teacher commentary, reproduce student's " earlier invective" (491). Woolf suggests that studying difference to effect ideological change is a process informed by resistance, for students produce resisting voices that, if transformation is to occur, must be tempered by "teacherly resistance that challenges illiberal, misogynistic reproduction of the dominant culture" (491).

This tense "dialogue" complicates attempts to promote cultural critique and effect ideological transformation. Hence teachers need to consider not only how to encourage students to resist social norms, and how to promote their idetification with alternatives, but how to address student resistance to these activities as well. They need to understand how students resist and how to respond to such resistance, so that resistance , produced by student response to a teacher's agenda and teacher response to student thinking, serves the goals of collective participation and transformation.

These issues began to concern me during the first year I taught a freshman writing course that asked students to read and write about difference . Students produced interpretations of multicultural perspectives on identity represented by Richard Rodriguez, Michelle Cliff and Paula Gunn Allen, and they were asked

to discuss the congruences and contrasts in their thinking and these perspectives. By having students illuminate the beliefs they had internalized, and asking them to analyze these convictions in relationship to alternative ways of understanding , I wanted them to examine the differences that emerged between their readings and conflicting interpretations, and subsequently reformulate their thinking by appropriating alternative perspectives-- to sexist, racist and classist thinking-- that the assigned texts could offer.

Early in the course my thinking was influenced by Giroux's theory of resistance, particularly the idea that students can produce response to the learning process that is not only oppositional, but represents a movement against the dominant ideology that can lead to ideological tansformation (110; see also Chase 14-15). I looked for statements and passages in student writing that either refused to support the status quo or suggested identifications with critical alternatives to social norms, to which I could respond in ways that would assist students to deconstruct dominant ideologies and to develop ideas connected to the alternative notions that they could derive from the readings. What happened, however, was that most students offered no signs of this sense of resistance. Rather, they generally derived from the text meanings that reflected mainstream values and beliefs, seeing what they already "knew." They ignored statements and passages throughout the text that represented, for me, perspectives that conflicted with beliefs that students frequently internalize. Hence most students refrained from reading the texts in ways that would make possible either an examination of differences or alignments with

alternatives to mainstream thinking.

This reaction was most evident in written responses to Michelle Cliff's writings. In "A Journey into Speech," Cliff explains her struggle as an Afro-Saxon writer -- a written self raised on "anglocentricism... the King's English" (58-59), yet gradually revised through her reclaiming multiple Afro-Caribbeann voices, a "struggle to get wholeness from fragmentation while working within fragmentation" (60). In "If I Could Write This in Fire, I would Write This in Fire," the fragmented self is created through the association and juxtaposition of "myth, dream, historical detail, [and] observation" rendered in the King's English and "native language," writing that performs the struggle of the social and cultural forces that shape Cliff's way of seeing--the lens of the colonized (62).

Many students chose to ignore this representation of a fragmented self engaged in social and cultural struggle, finding instead a unified world-traveler, one with which they could identify. Here is a section of Bill's response, a reading that typifies student response to Cliff's struggle:

> Cliff journeys all around the world to learn from people of other languages. In her essay she explains how she reads and travels in search of some kind of identity. The essay's title, "A Journey into Speech," is appropriate because in each new environment Cliff obtains knowledge from a different people. She discovers through the language, the speech, how people view themselves and how they feel about themselves, and she sees the differences of her society and that of other people.
>
> What Cliff shows me is that exposure to different cultures can change us. We can change our identity by learning and experiencing more of life and things outside our everyday lives.

Bill fails to examine the differences between his ideology and what the text might suggest-- about the relationship between identity and cultural struggle-- that conflicts with his internalized beliefs. He translates the colonized's story into a conventional humanistic scheme where the traveler moves through other cultures as if they were museums, a process that enlightens and precludes parochialism. Cliff's text offers little discussion concerning actual travel, however. Rather, it underscores a spiritual search to find ancestral voices of colonized black writers that the speaker can appropriate for the purposes of undermining the language of the colonizer and to "write as a complete Caribbean woman" (59). Despite the text's overt declaration of these intentions, Bill reads it to say that "exposure" to "things outside everyday life" educates us, and this process is devoid of complications or problems, because the self smoothly assimilates competing perspectives. At the same time, however, he refuses to acknowledge what the narrator suggests repeatedly about how difference, both internal and external, produces struggle and conflict. He ignores all implications that the interaction of cultures can produce struggle and conflict, that the narrator is constituted by conflicting forces-- that she is Afro-saxon, neither black nor white; a Jamaican who lives "halfway between Africa and England"; a product of colonizer and colonized; and "as a writer, as a human being," fragmented, multiple, constituted by differences (58-9).

As I stated earlier, I planned to respond to signs of resistance to social norms that my students presented in their

writings. But for Bill and many other students, the texts verified what they already believed. Questioning their assumptions about identity, culture, and the relationship between the two, and suggesting alternative perspectives through my commentary, I tried to provoke my students to rethink their interpretations, and thereby to begin an examination of competing ideologies. The majority of the class reproduced the ideology of their earlier writing, however, and those students who recognized the limitations of their thinking did not begin to identify with a critical alternative. Bill, for instance, acknowledged that interaction with different cultures can complicate one's understanding of identity, yet he continued to ignore how the text addressed the relationship between identity and cultural conflict. I asked Bill and other students to resist conventional thinking, without encouraging them to look harder at Cliff's text to find views that conflicted or challenged their initial interpretations, and thereby I failed to help them perform an examination of differences.

The few students who focused on distinguishing themselves from Cliff also refused to acknowledge the alternative ideologies that Cliff's writings might represent, electing instead to interpret these voices within the framework of conventional assumptions about race and gender. For instance, at one point in "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire," the narrator's cousin visits her while the latter is in England, and the cousin pressures her to sleep with him. Many students who discussed gender elected to discuss the cousin's visit. Here is Angela's analysis of what she deems to be Cliff's problematic notion of gender:

> Michelle and I have one similarity: we are both women. Otherwise, we don't have much in common. She is black and I am white; she is Jamaican and I am American. Michelle is homosexual and I am not.
>
> Women are different from men, because they're emotional, sometimes overdramatic. Michelle is trying to be unemotional-- to not get involved. She is trying to play the role of the man. But it is hard because she is a woman with womanly instincts. Still, she wants to control situations. When her cousin asks her to sleep with him, she controls the situation by hiding her sexual identity. Although she is a lesbian, and is probably offended by his behavior, she weasles her way out of the situation, and thereby retains control.

While Angela distinguishes herself from Cliff by acknowledging racial, national, and sexual differences, the distinction she focuses on is based on stereotypes of male and female identities. Women are demonstrative and submissive, while men are stoical and controlling. Angela may suggest opposition to the oppressive qualities of patriarchal behavior, yet she perceives difference within conventional perspectives on gender, and consequently does not illuminate how Cliff thinks differently, but rather how her behavior and thinking is, according to social norms, unwomanly.

Angela acknowledges difference when she addresses the narrator's sexual identity. At the same time, however, Angela's interpretation of the narrator's response to her cousin ignores how the narrator's sexual difference affects her behavior. Angela presents a strange, but perhaps conventional, perspective on "lesbian behavior." She implies that the narrator is "probably offended" by her cousin's unwelcome advances because she is a lesbian not because she is a woman. Angela also claims that the narrator hides her sexual identity to "play the role of the man."

What she ignores is what the text suggests about the narrator and her family, as well as the characterization of the narrator's cousin that develops during his visit. The narrator states that her cousin perceives her to be the "lady cousin," while she is really "the lesbian cousin " (73-4), thus suggesting a reason for hiding her sexual identity. Soon after, in a restaurant, she witnesses her cousin and his colleagues mock the way the homosexual waiters walk and talk. Moreover, the narrator's cousin asks her why she has brought him to "battyman's den"-- a derogatory Jamaican term for a place where gay men socialize(74). And when he makes an advance, he orders her to sleep with him, commanding "Come on lady, let's do it" (74). Hence she has substantial cause for feeling a sense of profound indignation toward her cousin, and good reason to conceal her sexual identity. After her cousin leaves, she reflects on what has occurred, remembering their "different skins and [their] different experiences within them" (74-5).

These readings of Cliff's texts, both my students and my own, represent the types of competing interpretations that make possible an examination of differences. Unfortunately, this is not what happened when I first taught this course. My questions in response to initial interpretations provoked students to modify their ideas slightly, but my commentary neither incited critique of prior readings nor facilitated alignments with views that conflict with these readings. In fact, revisions evinced the substantial impact social norms have had on them. Angela, for instance, acknowledged that men can be demonstrative, yet she claimed that such behavior was atypical. Moreover, she continued to ignore how the narrator's

sexuality might affect her identity, maintaining that the narrator's behavior reflected her desire to control situations and thereby "act like a man."

The way my students responded to my commentary suggests the importance of Bauer's and Bizzell's arguments for providing students with critical alternatives to the dominant ideologies they have internalized. Attempts to change ideology must offer a "language of resistance and identification" (Bauer 392; also see Bizzell 673). At the same time, we can't ignore how students' initial and subsequent responses affect our pedagogical intentions. As Bauer has acknowledged, students generally resist teaching informed by "collective moral and ethical rhetoric," and their response to the study of difference--in Bauer's example a feminist pedagogy--demonstrates that they "avoid participating in 'the dialectic of resistance and identification' " (386). If this behavior is not addressed and transformed, it is likely to preclude cultural critique and ideological transformation.

One way I could have addressed student resistance to participate was by having them investigate their resistance, so they might attain critical understanding of how and why they ignore social and cultural views that conflict with their own. In her work on psychoanalysis and pedagogy, Shoshana Felman, following the thinking of Freud and Lacan, defines interpretation as an active "desire to ignore," a resistance to know, which can be either conscious or unconscious (30-1). Felman argues that ignorance, or the resistance to know, can be instructive. Teachers can encourage students to explore, through re-reading and revision, the latter's

resistance and in doing so, begin to consider the value of interpretations that conflict with the views students have already articulated. I could ask Bill, for instance, what statements and passages in "A Journey into Speech" suggest that interaction with others is something other than an uncomplicated learning experience? Or how does Cliff's text define difference in ways that differ from Bill's first reading of this text? I could ask Angela to reread Cliff to determine what she has ignored about the narrator's cousin, what these statements and passages suggest about the narrator's behavior, and how this rereading contrasts with Angela's prior response to the text. By illuminating what they have ignored and examining the contrasting readings they have produced, students begin to participate in the examination of differences between competing perspectives on race, class and gender.

When I responded to my students' writings, I ignored, to a significant degree, how two functions that I needed to perform -- sustaining a dialogue and promoting ideological change -- impact upon one another. I had taken an uncritical view of recent arguments that advocate how a teacher's rhetorical authority can, and should, serve the objectives of promoting critique and transformation (see, for instance, Bauer 390; Bizzell 672-73), and in doing so I underestimated, perhaps ignored, how student resistance to participation affects a teacher's role in the rhetorical process. If teachers are to vitiate student resistance, they will have to assert and adapt their authority in response to the way students participate in the educational process. Balancing these activities does not compel teachers to deny the validity of

their authority. Nor does it mean that a teacher remains value-neutral and anti-authoritarian in the classroom. It means that teachers must perform functions that can conflict: they participate in a dialectic of guidance and challenge, in order to sustain the investigation of competing ideologies and, eventually, the establishment of new ideological alignments.

When the study of difference aims to promote resistance and ideological transformation, it asks students to participate in the social struggle over meanings, to engage in what Bakhtin calls the critical interanimation of languages , a process of becoming critically conscious of how the ideological systems indissolubly connected with languages contradict each other, and then choosing a language orientation (296). For many students, this is foreign and threatening territory. They are certain about their ethics and values; and experiencing ambivalence will be a slow, unsettling process, To illustrate this point, let me conclude by looking at a section of a student essay. This past semester, a student's first reading of "If I Could Write This is Fire, I Would Write This in Fire," focused on how the narrator uses color to define class structure. For this student, the narrator sees only extremes, blacks and whites, with the latter having the power that the former lacks. This student wrote that the same situation exists in America. I asked her to reread Cliff to find other significations of color, and to think about the implications of these meanings for American society. Here is a section of her rewrite:

> For Michelle Cliff color is a way to represent differences in the flesh and in the world. She sees tension within her race, light-skinned Jamaicans receiving more than dark-

skinned people. Cliff, a light-skinned black, learned to cherish her British heritage. She was taught to forget her Jamaican heritage. The light-skinned Jamaicans were taught to believe that they might even attain whiteness or "those qualities of the colonizer which made him superior."

I was taught to believe that people are people regardless of their skin color. Unlike Cliff, I was not separated in school from those who had a different skin color. We weren't taught that Whites were the "superior" race. However, our educators didn't teach us about how Blacks contributed to history, literature or technology. We were led to believe that Whites did everything.

Cliff helps me understand that groups and cultures can be divided within themselves because of social pressures. I see division in the Black community in America. Some of my high-school friends believe that to be successful you have to be White. I truly don't understand what exactly is meant by acting "White." I thought white was a color. However, I was told by another Black person that because I am in college and want to be a lawyer, I am acting "White."

By rereading Cliff, and looking for what she has ignored, this student begins to participate in the social struggle over meaning. It is a beginning, and no more, a movement away from certainty and into ambivalence. It is the type of participation that needs to be supported, and the kind of response that needs to be challenged by asking the student to reread text and world, again, to become more critically aware of what she still ignores, and thereby have the opportunity to move beyond ambivalence, toward resisting social norms and experiencing ideological transformation.

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